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AUTHOR Hatch, J. Amos
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes four problems that may confront researchers interested in capturing and describing participant perspectives when the participants of interest are young children in early childhood education settings. Problems were identified with interview data collected in three studies conducted in separate preschool and kindergarten classrooms. These data included typed transcriptions of taped formal interviews, notes taken by the researcher during formal interviews, and informal interview records contained in typed field-note protocols. The original studies followed Spradley's (1979; 1980) guides for conducting participant observation and ethnographic interview research. The four problems identified were: (1) the adult-child problem; (2) the right answer problem; (3) the pre-operational thought problem; and (4) the self-as-social-object problem. Each problem is described using interview data in order to demonstrate how that problem may interfere with the construction of interview contexts and the collection of interview data. Concluding discussion identifies several strategies researchers can use to improve the quality of formal and informal interviews conducted with young children. (RH)

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YOUNG CHILDREN AS INFORMANTS IN CLASSROOM STUDIES

J. Amos Hatch
College of Education
Claxton 216-B
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN 37996
(615) 974-4209

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Young Children as Informants in Classroom Studies

The following is taken from the transcript of an interview I conducted with a five-year-old boy. I provided him with photos of his classmates and asked him to select: "Your three best friends in the class--the three people you'ld like to have sitting at your table for the rest of the year."

Researcher: "So you picked Rodney, Lester, and Jeff."
Brett (pointing): "That's Lester Miller."
Researcher: "OK, why did you pick Lester Miller as one of your best friends?"
Brett: "'Cause he's my buddy, too."
Researcher: "How do you know he's your buddy?"
Brett: "'Cause."
Researcher: "'Cause why?"
Brett: "I don't know. (pause) 'Cause he's.... (pause) 'Cause he's a bear."
Researcher (not understanding): "'Cause he's a what?"
Brett: "He's a bear."
Researcher: "Why do you say he's a bear?"
Brett (pointing to bear shaped name tag Lester wears in the photo): "'Cause he's got that name tag on."
Researcher: "OK, Lester's got a bear name tag on; why did you pick Rodney as your best friend?
Brett: "(pause) 'Cause he's my friend, too."

I have done several qualitative studies of peer social behavior in early childhood settings. The data of these studies have included formal and informal interviews with young children. Through the processes of interviewing children like Brett and analyzing data from these interviews, I became interested in looking at how young children might be special kinds of informants because of the ways they understand their roles and make sense of their worlds. This paper reports some of my findings.

Ethnographers depend on their ability to capture participant perspectives in their data in order to report those perspectives in their descriptions. This paper describes four problems that may confront

researchers interested in capturing and describing participant perspectives when the participants of interest are young children in early childhood education contexts. The problems were identified using interview data collected in three studies conducted in separate preschool and kindergarten classrooms. These data include typed transcriptions of taped formal interviews, notes taken by the researcher during formal interviews, and informal interview records contained in typed field-note protocols. The original studies followed Spradley's (1979; 1980) guides for conducting participant observation and ethnographic interview research.

The four problems identified are: the adult-child problem, the right-answer problem, the pre-operational thought problem, and the self-as-social-object problem. I will describe each problem using interview data to demonstrate how that problem may interfere with the construction of interview contexts and the collection of interview data. I will conclude with a discussion of several strategies researchers can use to improve the quality of formal and informal interviews conducted with young children.

Informant Interviews and Participant Perspectives

The success of any ethnographic research project depends on the researcher's ability to gain clear understandings of the knowledge that "insiders" use to make sense of their world. The meanings that participants ascribe to actions and events are frequently hidden from the direct observation of the researcher and taken-for-granted by the participants. One way to get at these meaning structures is through informant interviewing. For interviews to provide the means for exploring participant perspectives, informants must be willing and have the ability to communicate their understandings to the researchers. Spradley summarizes the stance ethnographers adopt in relation to informants.

> By word and by action, in subtle ways and in direct statements, [ethnographers] say, "I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?" (1979:34)

In the optimum researcher-informant relationship, the informant becomes an active participant in the research process, recognizing and accepting the role of "teaching" the ethnographer (Hatch and Bondy 1986; Spradley 1979). It is a premise of this paper that there are certain qualities or characteristics of young children that make the development of optimum researcher-informant relationships (as we usually think of them) difficult, if not impossible. In addition, children's capacilities to understand and communicate may limit their abilities to reveal insider perspectives. For the purposes of this discussion, the qualities and characteristics that make children special kinds of informants will be called problems. It is recognized at the outset, that the "problems" belong to the researchers, not the children. It is the researchers who must adjust in order to improve the quality of interview data.

Adult-Child Problem

The most immediate and apparent problem in an interview context with young children is that the researcher is an adult and the informant is a child. Each enters the interaction with well-developed knowledge of the norms and expectations tied to the social roles of adult and child and of what status relationships between these two roles ought to be like. In many ways, the culturally defined superiority of adult status works directly against the establishment of harmonious researcher-informant relationships that are vital to ethnographic investigations. The give-and-take processes of developing rapport are the first step in building harmonious researcher-informant relationships (Dean, Eichhorn,

and Dean 1969). The nature of the adult-child relationship makes giving and taking difficult at the least.

Through my experiences doing formal and informal interviews with kindergarteners and preschoolers and my analyses of data from these interviews, I have come to accept the powerful influence of children's perceptions of appropriate behavior in adult-child interactions.[1] Spradley (1979) describes the confusion that can occur when traditional roles conflict with ethnographer and informant roles and warns that until individuals understand the ethnographer's role, they cannot easily assume the role of informants. Children seem to understand at some level that I am in their classroom to "find out what goes on there" and they quickly learn to ignore the video-tape camera, my note taking, and me. Still, when I talk to them face-to-face, the notion that I want to know what they know and learn to see things in the way they see them is not understood. Children see me first as an adult and they respond to me as an adult.

Damon (1983) characterizes adult-child relations in our culture as asymmetrical; children and adults both have expectations of each other, but their expectations are different. In adult-child relations, the adult is seen as the source of power and constraint and the child is expected to obey and respect adult authority. Adults guide, direct, and tutor while children seek guidance and, usually, acquiesce to adult directives.[2] I include the interview excerpt to follow as an example of a researcher (me, unfortunately) doing too much directing and exercising too much authority. It is especially evident in the tones of voice (captured in the audio tape but difficult to transcribe) that I was frustrated and the child was uncomfortable; both wanted the interview to end as quickly as possible. The task was the same as in the introductory excerpt: to explain friendship choices.

Researcher: "Tell me why you picked Randy as one of your best friends."
Dan: "(pause) 'Cause he likes me."
Researcher: "Oh, how do you know he likes you? What does he do?"
Dan: "He be nice."
Researcher: "What kinds of things does he do when he's being nice?"
Dan: (silence, his eyes shifting nervously from picture to picture)
Researcher: "Tell me about Tom. Why, what makes you think Tom is a good friend?"
Dan: "...(pause) 'Cause he be nice."
Researcher: "I see; and Jeff?
Dan: "'Cause he be nice."
Researcher: "I see. Why do you think they are nice to you?
Dan: "They be good."
Researcher: "How do you know that?"
Dan: (silence)
Researcher: "What do they do that means 'bein' good?'"
Dan: (silence)
Researcher (with an edge in his voice): "How can you tell when somebody likes you? What do they do?"
Dan" "Be good."
Researcher: "OK, only one more question."

The effect of the adult-child relationship is a given in this kind of research context. But, as will be discussed later, it is researchers' responsibility to build more equal role relationships and to avoid giving children any sense that their superior adult status is being used to compel children to respond.

Another dimension to the adult-child problem that is particular to classroom contexts is the widely held assumption among young students that any adult in their classroom must be a teacher. When teacher-student role expectations are added to adult-child expectations, another layer of obstacles is placed in the way of establishing optimum researcher-informant communications.[3] In the following excerpt, again using peer photographs, a child has selected three peers to be "in charge" of the class if no adults were present. The child demonstrates that he is thinking of me as one who is roughly equal in status to principal or teacher.

Researcher: "Why would Frank be good at taking care of of the other kids?"
Bobby" "'Cause he might be the principal or he might be the teacher."
Researcher: "Why would he be good at that?"
Bobby: "I don't know."
Researcher: "What about Jimmy? Why did you pick him as one who could be in charge?"
Bobby: "So I want him to be the principal."
Researcher: "What about Jimmy makes you think the other kids would treat him like the principal?"
Bobby: "I don't know."
Researcher (using playful voice): "What about this guy? Bobby. Why did you pick him to be in charge?"
Bobby: "Me?"
Researcher: "Uh-huh."
Bobby: "Um... (pause) 'Cause I wanna be you."

Right-Answer Problem

While interviewing in school contexts, I have been surprised and frustrated by the frequently held perception among young children that there are "correct" answers to my questions, that I know the answers, and that their job in the interview is to tell me the right answers. Such a perception, obviously, leads children not to reflect on and reveal their own perspectives. Instead, they play a kind of guessing game, all the time watching my face to see if they've hit on the right answer. As in the example below, children sometimes stayed with an answer that received a favorable response, using it again and again without recognition that the nature of the question had changed. I asked this child to pretend the principal had asked him to pick the three smartest children.

Researcher: "Why did you pick Jane as one of the smart ones?"
Jack: "Um... (pause) I don't know."
Researcher: "What does she do that lets you know she is one of the smart kids?"
Jack: "(pause) She's good."
Researcher: "Hmm, how do you know she is good. What does she do?"
Jack: "She listens."
Researcher: "Why did you pick Tony M. as one of the smart kids?"
Jack" "Uh... because... he's... he listens, too."

Jack goes on using "he listens" to rationalize his next "smart kid" choice, then continues to use it to explain "Why did you pick Mark (and Dave and Tony T.) as your best friends in class?" Although this might be interpreted as evidence that Jack could not decenter from "listening" as an attribute (decentering is discussed below), the context of this exchange indicates that Jack saw "he listens" as a response that solved for him the problem of the moment: generating an acceptable answer.

In an informal interview setting, I asked a preschooler, "What do you like to do best in the housekeeping center?" When I didn't respond immediately after she said, "Play dress-up," she added, "Is it computer?" When children define the interview context as a guessing game with the object of finding answers the researcher expects, they are not able to respond as informants. Their mind-set is not to reflect on the questions or describe their perspectives, but the psych out the right answers.

There is a close connection between adult-child and teacher-child role expectations described above and the right-answer problem. Adults, especially teachers, are supposed to possess superior knowledge and part of their role is to pass along that knowledge to children. An assumption at the core of the researcher-informant relationship is that the informant has special knowledge that the researcher seeks to learn. The conflict for children is apparent and that they don't know what to say when asked to, "Just tell me what you think" is understandable.

It may be, as well, that even children who are only beginning their school experiences have already interalized the right-answer emphasis that drives many educational programs today. These

young children may equate the interview context with patterns of instruction organized around recitation;[4] i.e., teachers ask questions to which there is one correct answer and students respond until the correct answer is given. Such patterns are becoming more and more common in early childhood classrooms (Hatch and Freeman in press) and may make it increasingly difficult to convince young informants that their own views and viewpoints are the desired responses in ethnographic interviews.

Pre-Operational Thought Problem

Developmental psychologists tell us that young children (from 2 to about 7) are at a stage of cognitive development known as pre-operations (Piaget 1954). Several characteristics of pre-operational thought may limit children's ability to respond in the same ways we might expect older informants to respond. Such characteristics include egocentrism (the inability to take another's point of view), complexive thinking (the stringing together of ideas that have no unifying concept), and centering (the inability to consider more than one aspect of a situation at one time) (Fischer and Lazerson 1984; Harris and Leibert 1984).

Egocentrism is explained differently by different social scientists. One view, based on Piaget's (1954) basic work, asserts that perspective taking is a general cognitive ability that develops in stages. Preschoolers, according to this view, have difficulty distinguishing others' perspectives from their own (Selman 1976). Another view is that perspective taking is a multidimensional construct (Kurdek 1978). According to this line of thinking, young children's egocentrism is the manifestation of many separate confusions and limitations, all of which are task specific.[5]

In any case, my observations and experiences with preschoolers and kindergarteners lead me to believe that, in interview contexts, these children have real difficulties understanding or explaining the points of view of others. If their limitations are task specific, as they may well be, then the cognitive manipulations required of the informant role qualify as tasks that will be problematic for most young children.

In one study, I asked children to pretend to be their teacher and, from her perspective, to describe and discuss their classmates. This strategy was very confusing for children and I dropped it after a few interviews. Most children, when asked to take their teacher's perspective, protested, "I don't know" or, like the child in this excerpt, demonstrated the inability to separate thier own from their teacher's point of view.

Researcher: "Why do you think Miss Taylor put you next to Rob at table two?"
Annie: "Because... um... Miss Taylor... because I... um... because I'm the leader."
Researcher: "Oh, what does that mean: 'the leader?'"
Annie: "Um... everyone has to follow me."
Researcher: "Why would Miss Taylor want Rob next to a leader like you?"
Annie: "I don't know."
Researcher: "Why would Miss Taylor say she picked Missi to sit with you and Rob?"
Annie: "Well that's not the leader, Debbie is. Debbie and me."
Researcher: "Why wouldn't Miss Taylor pick Missi as a leader?"
Annie: "Um... oh, Missi's mean to me."

Complexive thinking is a second cognitive limitation associated with pre-operational thought. I have observed scores of occasions when young children in interactions with peers have demonstrated complexive patterns of response. They piggy-back on their own ideas or those of their friends in charming and interesting, if not logical (in the adult sense) kinds of ways. In interviews, I have seen fewer clear examples of complexive thinking; still, it seems important for researchers to be aware of this phenomenon and to monitor its effects on interview

data. In the excerpt below, a four-year-old produces a set of responses that do not have a recognizable connecting pattern.

Researcher: "Why isn't he as smart as Jeff? We're talking about Tony M."
Frank: "'Cause he... (pause) almost every time, that's like Jack when you turn your back on Jack. Well, like, here's Jack and Tony. Well Jack turns his back on Tony, you know what he does?"
Researcher: "What?"
Frank: "He probably pinch you on the butt."
Researcher: "Oh, why would he do that?"
Frank: "I've seen Tony do it."
Researcher: "OK, what about May. Why did you pick her as one of the smartest?"
Frank: "'Cause... (pause) she is bigger than me and... (pause) she... (long pause)."
Researcher: "Let's talk about her being bigger. Is being bigger the same as being smarter?"
Frank: "Uh-huh. Like my brother. He's seven and he plays T-ball."
Researcher: "Is he big?"
Frank: "Yea, he's seven and in second grade."
Researcher: "I see, so who else is big in this group (of pictures)?"
Frank: "Lester."
Researcher: "So, should we say that Lester is one of the smart ones because he's big like May?"
Frank: "Uh-un, 'cause May and Ken were good friends, I'd say, 'cause they both liked cool stuff. May, Ken, and Brett like to walk in the hall like Michael Jackson and stuff like that."

The inability to decenter (to attend to more than one attribute at a time) is a third cognitive characteristic that may influence data. This seemed to be a particular problem for me as I tried to get young children talking about relationships with peers. For many children, once a particular attribute is selected, it become difficult for them to attend to something else. Attributes that children focused on most frequently included: physical size, clothing worn in photographs, proximity in classroom seating arrangements, proximity in the neighborhood, and who was well-behaved in class. The last of these may be influenced by the adult-child problem; i.e., the children may assume that adults expect good classroom behavior to be an appropriate attribute for

describing or classifying peers. One child demonstrated her commitment to equating size with being smart by exclaiming, when I pointed out that the largest girl in the class was not among her "smartest" group, "Yea, she's bigger; but she aint that bigger!"

Self-As-Social-Object Problem

Related to egocentrism, is the inability of young children to think of themselves in the same ways that they understand other persons or objects external to them. The ability to think of one's self as a social object was discussed by Mead (1934) and used later by Blumer (1969) as a basic principle of symbolic interactionism. It involves the capacity to step outside the immediate experience of being one's self and contemplate that self a if "it" were someone else. Understanding self-as-social-object means that persons can think of themselves as objects of their own actions (Blumer 1969). Mead (1934) describes the development of self-as-object using the contruct of role-taking. He notes that in order to become an object to himself (or herself), a person has to be able to take the role of another; i.e., to place himself in the position of others and act on himself from that position. We have already established the difficulties young children experience in performing such tricky mental operations. What seems important here is to emphasize that when children are interviewed concerning events observed in classroom contexts and asked to analyze their own behavior or reflect on their own motives or attitudes, they may not be able to step outside the immediate experience of being themselves and respond as we would hope.[6] When I have asked children to explain the reasons behind their actions, they frequently responded by repeating descriptions of those actions or offering, "Because, just because" statements. Some children attributed the reasons for their action to their brain ("My brain told me"). One child, made it clear that she thought it was absurd for me to even suggest she think of her

self as a separate entity. When I asked her why she didn't select herself as one of the smartest children, she looked astonished, put her hand on her chest, and said, "Because I'm right here."

In summary, it may be useful to remember that an ethnographic interview is a particular kind of communication context or "speech event." (Spradley 1979).[7] Shultz, Florio, and Erickson (1982) describe three types of knowledge needed for appropriate and effective communicative participation: (1) knowledge of the assumptions about proper ways for people to interact in various social situations; (2) possession of the verbal and nonverbal performance skills necessary for producing communicative action; and (3) possession of the interpretive skills necessary for making sense of the communicative intentions of others. The problems described in this paper can be thought of as explantions for why children have difficulties participating in the special communicative contexts of interviews. The adult-child and right-answer problems are tied to children's inability to understand assumptions about "proper" role behaviors in interview contexts. Their level of cognitive and social development, as evidenced in the pre-operational and self-as-social object problems, may limit their abilities to interpret and respond to the special communications required in the interview context.

Strategies for Improving Interviews with Young Children

I have argued that the general problems described above limit the researcher's ability to conduct ethnographic interviews in the usual "adult" ways. The following suggestions are offered as strategies for dealing with problems inherent in trying to uncover participant perspectives of young students: 1) Take time to establish personal

relationships with students; 2) Emphasize informal rather than formal interviewing as studies are designed and implemented; 3) Ask questions children can answer, expect them to answer, and accept their answers; 4) Provide concrete or semi-abstract symbols to elicit explanations of classroom social phenomena. Each strategy is discussed below.

In his study of a preschool peer culture, Corsaro (1981; 1985) very carefully and deliberately attempted to deal with "problems of physical size and perceived power" by spending and extended period of time doing participant observation and employing what he called "reactive" field entry strategies (Corsaro 1981: 118). Reactive entry meant he made himself available for interactions with children without actively beginning contacts himself.

I believe that Corsaro's strategies are instructive even for researchers who have neither the time nor the capacity to participate, like Corsaro, as a child peer in a preschool. Interview data can be improved if researchers take time to establish personal relationships with young children. The less time the researcher gives to developing these relationships, the more likely it is that the adult-child and right-answer problems will interfere. I agree with the general position of Dean, Eichhorn, and Dean (1969) that because researcher-informant relationships are so important, the researcher should be willing to sacrifice initial data, if necessary, to facilitate the development of harmonious relationships. For children especially, time to become familiar with the researcher is essential.

Corsaro's (1981) reactive stance makes sense here as well. In his attempts to reduce the distance between himself and children, Corsaro purposefully avoided acting like other adults he had observed in the school. He noted that other adults were primarily "active;"

i.e., they directed, monitored, helped, told, and initiated. His strategy of avoiding these behaviors and reacting to children provides a guide for reducing role barriers between adults and children.

I see three major reasons for emphasizing informal rather than formal interviews in studies involving young informants. First, the structure of a formal interview emphasizes the superior power of the researcher. The researcher decides on the place and time, directs the action, asks the questions, and in some way records the responses. In addition, to the child, the formal interview any look like a one-on-one testing situation common in educational programs that periodically evaluate skill mastery, setting up a right-answer problem. Second, in informal settings, the spontaneous actions of children can be the starting point of an interaction that has a contextual base in their reality. It is much easier to ask children to explain or reflect on their actions immediately after their occurrence than to ask them later to recall the situation in the artificial context of a formal interview. Third, children will feel more comfortable in the natural surroundings their classroom or playground than when they are taken away from teacher and peers and asked to spend time alone with a relative stranger. Many young children will be reluctant to talk with strangers and, even if time and effort have been spent establishing relationships with children, some will be hesitant to go somewhere alone with the researcher. When formal interviews are decided upon, doing them <u>in</u> the classroom may provide a good alternative.

In formal and informal interviews, researchers should ask questions children can answer, signal children that they expect an answer, and be prepared to accept their answers. It is a mistake to expect young children to attend to questions or generate responses that involve complex or abstract relationships. As with adult interviews, researchers

should have guiding questions in mind but expect that questions will emerge from the interview interaction, the social context being considered, and the degree of rapport that has been established (Spradley, 1979). If questions are designed so that children are expected to take the perspective of another or to discuss their own behavior as if belonged to a social object separate from their immediate experience of self, then researchers should frame such questions by making explicit the perspective they are after; e.g., "Pretend you were playing with this puzzle at the puzzle center and Mary came and took the puzzle away before you were finished. What would you do?" (or) "What do you think Mary was thinking when she took the puzzle?"

When I suggest that researchers "expect children to answer," I do not mean they should demand answers. Some children have learned that a safe response to almost any adult question is no response. I have found places in my data where children have used this strategy to get me, in essence, to interview myself. In these situations, I begin by repeating and restating questions, then offering alternative answers, and finally saying, "Is it _____?" hoping for a confirming nod. It may be that in these "no response" situations, the problems being discussed in this paper override the possibility of a real interactive exchange between the researcher and child. Nonetheless, it is important for the researcher to signal real interest in each child's responses and real expectations that the child will respond?[8]

Accepting children's answers is essential if the right-answer phenomenon is to be avoided. Understanding pre-operational thought processes described earlier should help researchers interpret some response patterns in young children. When it becomes clear in an interview that the child is having difficulty interpreting the questions

or generating answers, it is better to forfeit plans than to confuse the child or make him or her uncomfortable.

When researchers select more structured interview settings, they should, where possible, assist children by providing concrete artifacts from the classroom. Such objects provide a symbolic bridge to the social context of interest. For example, if the researcher is interested in a child's concept of sharing and has observed the child playing with a favored toy, bringing the toy to the interview reduces the level of abstract thinking required. The child can hold the toy and describe feelings and attitudes about sharing more easily than without the bridge. Another device that reduces the abstract nature of formal interviews is to provide photographs or videotapes [9] of classroom activity. Showing a classroom scene and asking children to discuss the meanings of actions they can observe directly is a far more effective strategy than asking them recall the situation or prompting them with a verbal description.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to give researchers tools for examining and taking into account children's perspectives as classroom studies are planned and implemented. I conclude with a reminder that the conditions and perceptions discussed are "problems" only because they inhibit the construction of interview contexts in adult ways. Children's perspectives and ways of understanding are not inferior and should not be thought of as "getting in the way" of data. Researchers interested in studying classroom cultures in early childhood settings should think of children's differences not as obstacles so much as sources of data. It is hoped that the ideas presented here will assist researchers in that endeavor.

Footnotes:

1. It is probable that my being a "male" adult generates a particular set of responses in young children. Still, I am sure female researchers face the same general problems addressed here.
2. See also Hartup (1979) for a comparison of adult-child and peer relations.
3. For an analysis of interactions between teachers and children, see Much and Schweder (1978).
4. Bossert (1979) describes recitation organized classrooms and their effects on children's social behavior with peers.
5. Damon (1983) offers an excellent analysis of differing views of egocentrism.
6. Related research indicates that children do not include psychological factors in self-definitions until ages 8 or 9 (see Perry & Bussey 1984).
7. Spradley notes the contribution of Hymes (1974) on this point.
8. The notion of "wait-time" probaby applies here (see Rowe, 1974). Like teachers, researchers should give children time to think after questions, rather than immediately following up, restating, or asking new questions; more complex questions require longer wait-time.
9. Playing back videotapes for informants is also a useful tool for checking the fit between researchers' and participants' interpretations of classroom action (see Mehan 1979; Erickson & Shultz 1981).

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